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Südostasien sehen / South-East Asia Visually

Capturing Singapore's 'Little India': The Search for Identity in Traditional Photo Studios

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In popular iconography, in media, advertisement or touristic images, Singapore is popularly seen and depicted as a multinational space peppered with world-finance institutes in hi-tech skyscrapers symbolising growth, development and progress. Often, visual and pictorial representation of the city focuses on future imagination, or on present achievements- virtually banning any signs, symbols and spaces from the past. When tourists walk around looking for postcards, the ones they will find will most probably depict recent architectural icons or scenes of modern or urban landscapes.

Besides a pictorial conflict between modernity and traditions of the past one can also observe a cultural dichotomy. In this sense, most cultural influences stemming from Singapore's ethnically heterogeneous citizens run the risk of becoming marginalised, especially in the city centre which presents itself in a Westernised appearance, dominated by an aura of the internationalisation. One of these unique cultural marks, the mere existence of which contradicts the visual hegemony of Westernised interna-

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tionality, is Singaporean Little India located east of Singapore River near Chinatown. The Indian community in Singapore is a living carrier of a distinct variant of Tamil cultural heritage and – within the local Tamil community - is known as *Tekka*.

According to the recent census data Indians account for nine percent of the country's population, which makes it Singapore's third largest ethnic group after Chinese and Malays. Over 348,000 citizens in Singapore are of Indian descent³ – which is one of the largest Indian overseas populations (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010, p.35).

Entering Singaporean Little India is like entering a separate island, where the law of time functions differently from the outside world and almost mystical elements and images of a past decade appear in front of the visitor, which actually only seems to be so long gone because of the huge contrast to the encircling quarters that makes the latter appear as long forgotten already. Some elements of Singaporean Little India appear especially outstanding for representing almost disappeared cultural practices and visual codes. These were the traditional photo studios just off the Serangoon Road, the main commercial street in Little India. Two of them were selected as icons of cultural identity production and witnesses of cultural adherence. *Sajeev Digital Studio* and *Gandhi Video* are loci of traditional cultural ethnic practices situated right in the heart of Singapore and they are extraordinary examples of some rare places that could manage to endure in spaces whose economic logic would usually deprive them of any right to coexist. The proximity of these studios to Singapore's spatial testimonials of modernity makes the appearance of traditional photo studios even more superficial and has them constitute a kind of borderland/zone not only between different economic and cultural logics but also between progress and past, digital vs. analogue era and techniques. Usually we would have expected these places to be vanished from the streets already some time ago, but in certain cases they are sustained by people appreciating the cultural goods and practices they produce and constitute themselves.

Traditional photographic studios release dreams into reality and through this produce a new world of memories. Surprisingly the rapidly rising number of digital cameras and therewith the "empowerment" of the home and amateur user as a photo & visual producer did not change the popular demand for traditional photos in Hindu and Muslim communities. These communities still rely on professional photographers and

3 The Census Report specifies ethnic group as referring to a "a person's race . . . as declared by the person. *Indian* refers to persons of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan origin such as Tamils, Malayalis, Punjabis, Bengalis, Singhalese, etc" (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010, p.35).



the culturally distinct representation of reality which is also uniquely framed through the technical means of production. Through hand painted backdrops, plastic flowers, pillars and other props these photo-studios keep traditions alive in their own spirit. Each photograph presents a particular aesthetic appearance – often so different from the visual character of everyday life – that extends these lives to a sphere through culture and time specific image production and extends the visual frame of human life. The traditional photo studios discovered and depicted in this photo submission mark a cultural, traditional and visual oasis in buzzing metropolis. They constitute places, where everything is possible, where dreams come true. For Indian photo-studios, Singapore is a foreign land and a frontier. Seeing their mutations within that border zone is pretty unusual and it is worth to consider it as a pop heritage by which I understand a fusion between tradition and pop culture, a kind of informal consensus within mainstream culture, where the second one can be called a modern tradition, but is still not classified as part of the official heritage. There are not many cultures like the Indian one where folk and visual documents are so firmly connected to the photographic industry, making photo studios and their products strong rich symbols and carriers of cultural identity.

References

Singapore Department of Statistics. (2010). *Census of Population 2010. Advance Census Release*. Last retrieved 5 December 2011, from <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/c2010acr.pdf>

- 1 LITTLE INDIA - Little India is located pretty much in the centre of Singapore. Judging from the look of the area one weirdly has the impression of actually being in India, not Singapore. Initially I did not know where in particular to go, but the crowd and hand-painted street adverts told me that I am in the right place to search for traditional Indian photo studios.
- 2 POST JEWELLERY - Despite the fact that Little India was not affected too hard by the recession of 2008 many shops in the area empty. Here bright red velvet showcases without items rest as relicts of a jewellery shop. No gold, no silver any more. Although these jewellery shops are strongly associated with Indian culture, a lot of them did not survive while others managed to successfully continue their existence.
- 3 IN FRONT OF GANDHI VIDEO - Looking deeply into many streets of the Indian quarter in Singapore, only two studios were found, surprisingly both on the same street. *Gandhi Video*, a very modern studio and *Sajeev Photo Studio* of a rather traditional type. Both appeared in strong contrast to the modern and international encircling quarters but within their visual tradition and production technique also contrasted each other. While one

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focuses on traditional techniques, uses hand-painted backdrops and real props, the other one mainly applies digital techniques for crafting a background and the overall motive creation. Other photography shops were found in the neighbourhood, too, but unlike these two the others did not provide any portraiture space. From a cultural identity perspective this seems to be quite relevant since from representation of gods in Hinduism to Bollywood Indian culture the visual code is extremely portraiture orientated. Over the years, many traditional studios were converted into photography related multitasking shops and service providers with fax, Xerox, and other devices. Similar to such shops in India, studios adapt to market needs and go multifunctional but some of them, like *Gandhi Video* still keep their service of producing traditional portraits – although nowadays the backdrops used in the photos are often pure digital creation instead of hand-made paintings.

- 4 INSIDE GANDHI VIDEO - *Gandhi Video* has very limited space. Customers can not enter the premises unless they have previously arranged an appointment with a photographer. Only one person at a time is allowed.
- 5 INSIDE SAJEEV DIGITAL STUDIO - During my short visit to the studio, I noticed the extreme popularity of this place amongst the Indian population. There were moments when one had to line in the queue already outside the front doors. Partly adapting to modern demands, *Sajeev Digital Studio* offers digital prints and photo copying but does not give up the production of intensively modified and stylised portraits.
- 6 ALMOST ICONIC - INSIDE SAJEEV DIGITAL STUDIO - These images depict extremely popular trends back from the 1970ies. Often popular aesthetics of portrait photos consist of a mixture between religion, folk tradition and cinema. To many Indians, Bollywood, Lollywood, and other local film industries have a much stronger influence than Hollywood or Western





culture in general. To outsiders, these portraits might appear funny and sometimes ridiculous – to Indians they are common visual cultural code. Above the photo of the young boy one can find a portrait of the studio owner - working in a dark room which does not exist anymore today.

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DIGITAL MUTATIONS - INSIDE SAJEEV DIGITAL STUDIO - Variations in photographic trends and image styles are visible everywhere in the studio - probably the most common style is to multiply the motive. Can this be interpreted as a sign of the time? In any case it seems clear that digital technology pushes the popular aesthetics and visual imaginations into new spheres that further depart from reality or real world visual appearances. Often in contemporary Indian photo studios digital backgrounds nowadays replace the formerly hand-painted backdrops. Background can also become totally abstract or sometimes laced with obscure details. In the analogue past 'being multiplied' on the photograph was possible but not so common due to the enormous technical effort. In Indian pop photography one can however find some examples of this technique- mainly in wedding photographs. Back in the day photographers or developers used scissors and glue instead of Photoshop or other photo retouching software. Some of the images were nevertheless done so well that is hard to believe they were hand retouched.

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WALL OF PORTRAITS - INSIDE SAJEEV DIGITAL STUDIO - Copies of the passport photos shot in the studio were pinned on walls and ceiling and filled the whole studio. Surprisingly almost all of them present males only. Even though most of them are serve as common and functional portrait shots most are done in front of traditionally hand made backdrop landscapes. I have been told by the photographers inside the studio that the most common portraits these days are just simple passport style shots - often with the various backdrops though. Although stylised photography lives on in Little India some





trends to more neutral photography can also be found. For example traditional photographs created in professional studios in India often contain colourful and patterned borders. Both studios I visited in Singapore do not do that anymore. I was told that there is no need for this these days. This was probably the biggest difference to studios in India itself, particularly to Rajasthan, where borders are an inseparable element of the photograph.

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THE PHOTOGRAPHER - INSIDE SAJEEV DIGITAL STUDIO - I was pretty surprised when I asked where the upwards stairs would lead to: there was another studio in the studio. Inside the upstairs studio, I was not allowed to take more than one photo. The reasons were not clear, but I felt I had to respect this decision. For making the best of it I asked the photographer who took a photo of me to now also pose in front of my camera.

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ANALOGUE REMNANTS - INSIDE SAJEEV DIGITAL STUDIO - Although digital medium has a total monopoly in the studio, there are plenty signs of the past analogue photographic techniques. Already the front doors serve as a stock of used negatives and films - it is a trace of the romantic and nostalgic to chemical photography past when photography was much more a craftsmanship. Even though I could buy negative film in Sajeev's place, there is no more usage of analogue film cameras there anymore. Next to empty negative film cases some analogue shots were still displayed in the shop's windows - but not changed for several years and already bleached by the sun.

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36 IN 1 - INSIDE SAJEEV DIGITAL STUDIO - It was quite surprising- why this man appears on the window display on so many exactly the same photographs? Later I realised this is Mr Sajeev, founder and owner of the studio. What could better represent the importance of portraits as this decorative choice?



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MR. SAJEEV & A CLASSICAL CHINESE PORTRAIT - INSIDE SAJEEV DIGITAL STUDIO - Even in busy Singapore there seems to be some spare time to keep up the habit of visiting a photo studio like Mr. Sajeev's. Main customers are of course Indians who live here, but on the walls one can also find photographs of ethnic Chinese couples and others. Their photos appear to be of a somehow different character. They are more classical in their posing and have more sincere facial expressions. It appears as if they choose these classical poses because the photo studios seem to have a different value and purpose for them. Most portrait photos of non-Indian ethnic communities found in the studio depict a specific or special occasion, such as a degree ceremony or the wedding. In contrast to that, the photos depicting members of the Indian community seem to have a cultural dimension of their own – not depicting a cultural scene or rite. Next to the portrait of the Chinese couple and in the centre of the picture: a photograph of Mr. Sajeev - the owner of the studio - residing in a glamorous picture frame above the counter. In the foreground- his daughter who works on the front desk but also does passport portraits in the back room. In the picture, Mr. Sajeev is proudly presenting his at that time state-of-the-art and passionately desired VHS camera.

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KUBA RYNIEWICZ – INSIDE SAJEEV DIGITAL STUDIO - Photo Studios in Poland, which disappeared rapidly after 1989 and the end of the communist era had an enormous impact on my approach to photography and to the visualisation of my memories. Visiting a photo studio was something unique and always associated with special occasions such as First Communion, weddings or birthdays. For a number of years I did not realise how strong their impact on my personal memories was. In 2008 I visited the western coast of India and Rajasthan. It was hard to believe that in one of the central production countries of globalised digital camera industry, so many traditional and popular photo studios survived. This journey made me recall nostalgic moments of my childhood and pushed me to search for more information about this tradition in India. For the above photo I simply asked if the staff at Sajeev Digital Studio could take a beautiful portrait of me. This is the result. For 15 Singaporean Dollars (around 9 Euros), I got three copies of the same photograph, for a scan I would have had to pay an additional fee.